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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

A SANE INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

REV. HENRY KINGMAN, D.D.
Claremont, California

Commentaries on the Bible are not generally classed under the head of general literature, but this volume¹ by Shirley Jackson Case might almost find its place in that popular company. It is of unexpected interest to anyone interested either in human nature or in current religious problems. The commentary proper, with a new translation of the text, takes up less than half the volume. The remaining chapters are devoted to the general problem of apocalyptic, and to the circumstances under which this particular book of revelation was written. There is also a historical résumé of the pathetic attempts at its interpretation by the Christian church—ever changing with changing historical conditions. When once the plain intent of the document was forgotten or ignored, then pious imagination had an all but unlimited field of possibilities to wander through, and it wandered far and wide, and, alas! still is wandering. The whole history of the book is an amazing one, looked at from any angle that you will. And Dr. Case's handling of the material, if not always convincing in detail, is scholarly, forceful, and, from any modern point of view, unanswerable.

Its purpose is not to defend any theory or conform to any fixed presuppositions, but to explain the meaning of Revelation as the author intended it to be understood by those to whom it was addressed. This is certainly an honest and reasonable intent—to endeavor to understand what the author meant to say. And if it is true that he meant to say something that the passage of

time has not confirmed, the sooner we fit this fact into our current ways of religious thinking the better.

No one—unless under the influence of strong preoccupation of judgment can read John's prophecy and not perceive that it was concerned with issues immediately at hand. It was not designed to be a prophecy whose meaning should gradually unfold after long lapse of time had prepared the way for its fulfilment. It was a tract for the times. Language could not declare more plainly than it does that its significance was for the readers of that day. Its Preface clearly states that the fulfilment of the great events it foretells must shortly come to pass, that the time was actually at hand. And the same warning of the immediateness of the impending judgment is repeated in the closing chapter. Indeed, the prophecy was to be left unsealed for that very reason. He who was unjust was to be unjust still, because there was no time for change of character before the cataclysm should fall. It was no vague academic indictment of thrones and powers thousands of years away, across the margin of the world. It was a vivid-passionate denunciation of a then living enemy, already drunken with the blood of the saints. This could be no other than the Babylon of pagan Rome, and the balance still seems to incline in favor of Nero *redivivus* as the Beast of the mystic number 666.

No one can read thoughtfully through these chapters of the Revelation, clothed in a slightly different dress from that to which

¹ *The Revelation of John*. By Shirley Jackson Case. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1919. Pp. xii+419. \$2.00.

we are accustomed, without realizing anew how bewildering a labyrinth of imagery is here, and how impossible it is for us to come to any ordered and final arrangement of the feverish chaos of portents and marvels. None but a mind steeped in the extravagant wonders of Jewish apocalyptic could have martialed such a phantasmagoria of strange living things working out the supreme vengeance of history in a world under torment.

It rouses one's wonder anew that a most popular school of interpretation in our day should found its program of the future upon a single item of this imagery taken literally—the time period of one thousand years of moral calm, to be secured by capturing the dragon, binding him with a huge chain, and sealing him up in a hole in the earth, so that he could no longer seduce the nations. National decadence is hardly to be checked by any method so simple! Indeed, the literal interpretation of any portion of such a picture, as of any of the pictures preceding it, would seem to involve one in a sheer grotesquerie of unreason.

It is almost a relief to find the weight of present-day scholarship pronouncing against the apostolic authorship of such a book. The author would seem to be one John the Presbyter, not John the Apostle. It lays no claim to being the work of the latter, and it is hard to imagine how it could have come from any apostle of love. Still harder is it to reconcile it with what we know of the apostolic spirit, the spirit of him who was the friend of publicans and sinners. It looks out upon the pagan world, not as did the Good Shepherd on the straying sheep, but as a wrathful accuser on a world of Satanic enemies. It has for them no prayer, no mission, no suggestion of mercy

or forgiveness. Its spirit is the familiar one of the Jewish zealot who would wash his feet in the blood of his enemies. All save the little company of the saints—all the ignorant and fearful and unbelieving all the prodigal sons and daughters, all the peoples of the Gentiles—are to be tortured with fire, day and night forever and ever, in the presence of Him whom Jesus set forth as our Father. The author stands not as one looking eagerly out on the morning of a new gospel, to be proclaimed to every creature under heaven, but as one just at nightfall, invoking the final catastrophe that shall give the victory to the Christ through the slaughter of all humanity who are not yet his disciples. It is the antithesis of the missionary gospel, and as such it resists all attempt to bring its major motive into harmony with the message of Jesus.

Perhaps the most valuable part of Dr. Case's book is its admirable summary of the apocalyptic literature of that age, chiefly Jewish, but also Christian and pagan. It is quite impossible to understand sympathetically the Revelation of John without some familiarity with the clearly defined characteristics of this curious form of literature, so peculiar to that age.

A less attractive feature of the commentary is its failure to render any clear appreciation of the moral passion of the Revelation, its superb faith in the supremacy of righteousness, and the exquisite, haunting beauty and stately eloquence of many of its passages. For when all has been said that may be said in adverse criticism, it remains a marvelous document to have sprung out of any century; and reverent souls will always turn to it for the glowing expression of hopes that for the most part lie beyond reach of human language.